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*commentary*

## Aide's Slaying May Open Aquino's Eyes

**T**he assassination of a key member of Philippine President Corazon Aquino's cabinet last week—believed to be the work of a communist hit team—may finally have pulled the blinders off the president on the dangers of dealing with the communists.

The tragic irony is that the murdered secretary, Jaime Ferrer, privately considered his president naive in trying to win over the communist rebels through negotiations. He confided this to Dale Van Atta during an interview in Manila last December.

Ferrer didn't want his opinion to be quoted publicly—and he certainly had no desire to have his own violent death be the possible proof of his belief. At the time, Aquino was negotiating a cease-fire with the communists. Ferrer, 70, had been an anti-Japanese guerrilla in World War II; he thought Aquino's release of communist leaders from jail in February 1986, and her subsequent negotiations with them, were a fatally flawed policy.

Ferrer had the kind of rock-solid integrity that no president wants to be deprived of. The overriding principle of his politics was free and honest elections—an often quixotic pole star for a politician in the Philippines.

Initially a supporter of fellow wartime guerrilla leader Ferdinand Marcos, Ferrer became a cabinet aide in 1966, during the first Marcos administration, and then served as chairman of the elections commission from 1968 to 1972. He told us he and Marcos had many arguments over the issue of clean elections, and these confrontations led to his disenchantment with Marcos. Ferrer

finally quit in 1972, despairing of ever getting the president's support for an honest electoral process.

Ferrer's dedication to democracy goes back a long time. In 1949, he was dismayed when Jose Laurel (father of the current vice president, Salvador Laurel) lost the presidency in a blatantly corrupt election. He and other honored World War II veterans spearheaded the formation of the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), and Ferrer was elected the first national coordinator. The result was encouraging: a clean election in November 1951. "We had won," Ferrer said. "We had maintained that there could not be any democracy without clean elections."

In NAMFREL's early stages, and continuing into the 1960s, Ferrer was aided by two successive U.S. Embassy officers. Both were later identified as CIA agents, which Ferrer told us he had not known when he was dealing with them. But Philippine leftists later used his unwitting CIA connection to try to discredit him. In 1984, Ferrer joined the official opposition, winning a parliamentary seat as a member of the Democratic Party.

It was the descendant of Ferrer's old NAMFREL organization that exposed the widespread fraud in the 1986 election and ignited the popular movement that eventually brought Aquino to power. Last November, he embarked on a program to purge incompetent and corrupt local officials. That was his "primary concern," he told us.

His secondary concern—the one that may have triggered his assassination—was his espousal of a network of anticommunist militias in areas where the communist New People's Army operates.

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